

Gastroenteritis in children

Gastroenteritis is a bowel infection that causes diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting. Diarrhoea is runny, watery bowel motions. The vomiting may settle quickly, but the diarrhoea may last up to 10 days. Bouts of gastro can cause dehydration, which can be dangerous for very young babies.

Causes of gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is caused by a variety of viruses and bacteria. If gastro occurs more than once the cause may be slightly different each time. Gastroenteritis can spread easily.

Children with gastroenteritis must keep drinking

Make sure your child drinks clear fluids. Babies under six months old can become ill quickly with gastro - they need extra fluids to replace fluids lost by diarrhoea and vomiting. It is important for the fluids to be taken even if the diarrhoea seems to get worse. It will help if you:

- Offer babies a drink every time they vomit
- Give older children a drink (150-200 ml) after every big vomit or bout of diarrhoea
- Give small amounts of fluids often if your child is vomiting a lot (a mouthful every 15 minutes).

Bottle and breastfeeding

If you are breastfeeding, continue to do this as well. If bottle feeding, give clear fluids for the first 12 hours, then give the normal formula in smaller, more frequent amounts.

Go to the doctor if your child is very sick

Take your child to the doctor if they vomit often, are not drinking and show any signs of dehydration. You should also see the doctor if there is blood in the bowel motion.

Babies under six months sometimes need extra visits to the doctor; they need to be checked again after six to 12 hours. Your doctor can advise what other steps to take.

Do not give medicines to reduce the vomiting or diarrhoea.

Watch for signs of dehydration

Go to your doctor if you notice that your child:

- has a dry mouth and tongue
- is not passing urine (dry nappies)
- has sunken eyes
- has cold hands and feet
- is more sleepy than usual.

Prevention of dehydration with gastro

To prevent dehydration you must give clear fluids like:

- oral rehydration products that you buy from a pharmacist. Follow instructions to make it up

- sugar solution (sucrose) -1 teaspoon of sugar to 1 cup of water
- fruit juice (natural) - 1 tablespoon to 4 tablespoons of water
- cordials (not low calorie) - half a cup of cordial to eight (8) cups of water
- lemonade - (not low calorie) 1 tablespoon to 4 tablespoons of water.

Children can eat their usual foods

Your child may refuse food at first. This is not a problem as long as they drink clear fluids. Doctors now suggest there is no need to restrict food. Generally, if your child is hungry at any time, give them the food they normally eat.

How to prevent the spread of gastro

You can prevent the spread of gastro to other people if you:

- Make sure everyone in the family washes their hands regularly, especially after they use the toilet and before they eat
- Wash your child's hands with warm water and soap after they use the toilet and before and after they eat
- Wash your hands before you feed and after you change your child's nappies
- Keep your child away from other children as much as possible until the diarrhoea has stopped.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- The 24 hour Maternal and Child Health Telephone Service: Tel. 13 22 29 (for the cost of a local call throughout Victoria).
- Local school nurse

Things to remember

- Gastroenteritis can cause dehydration, especially in young children and babies.
- Everyone, especially children, needs to drink plenty of clear fluids if they have gastroenteritis.
- Gastroenteritis is easy to catch.
- Avoid spreading gastro - wash your hands with warm water and soap.
- See your doctor if symptoms continue.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DH - RHP&R - Health Protection - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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